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SUBJECT: EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR VIETNAM'S ETHNIC MINORITY  
CHILDREN

REF: A) HCMC 517

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite the GVN's goal of ethnic minority development in the Central Highlands, ethnic minorities continue to lag behind their Kinh counterparts in education, and as a result in almost every other economic enterprise. Due to cultural, historical, and pedagogical obstacles to educational attainment, ethnic minorities begin their educational careers at a distinct disadvantage to ethnic Vietnamese students and continue to fall behind thereafter until, all too frequently, they drop out entirely. While the GVN has instituted programs to rectify this "education gap," those programs are hamstrung by an ideological commitment to national unity at the expense of learning outcomes as well as by an extreme scarcity of the human resources that would be needed to implement major educational reforms tailored to the unique needs of ethnic minorities. While improving education for ethnic minorities represents an enormous challenge, the stakes are high: if the GVN fails to ameliorate the educational and thus economic marginalization of ethnic minorities, past and present discontentment among the minorities will almost certainly grow worse as they fall further and further behind their ethnic Vietnamese neighbors. End Summary.

#### STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS HAMPER EDUCATION

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¶2. (SBU) Improving education in the Central Highlands is not an easy task. While enormous steps have been made in access to primary education, an efficient, child-friendly educational system producing secondary-educated, skilled students is still far away. Indeed, improving Vietnam's dysfunctional educational system ranks among Missions Vietnam's top goals. In the case of the ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands, these systemic weaknesses in the Vietnamese educational system are greatly exacerbated by factors unique to ethnic minorities and the region.

¶3. (SBU) Economic and cultural factors act as barriers to education for ethnic minority children. Economics is an important factor. Simply put, ethnic minorities are caught in a vicious circle in which poor people are unlikely to excel in school and uneducated people are unlikely to escape poverty. Because more than 50 percent of Vietnam's ethnic minorities currently live in poverty, they are disproportionately caught in this vicious cycle. The impact of poverty on educational attainment is exacerbated for ethnic minorities by the fact that the inexpensive foods they traditionally consume must be communally prepared and are not easily transported to school, effectively forcing many poor children to choose between lunch and school. In addition, as in any poor farming region, child labor is a fact of life and the opportunity costs of children attending school rather than helping in the fields can be

prohibitive for a subsistence farming family.

14. (SBU) The dearth of economic opportunities for ethnic minorities makes investment in their children's education even less appealing: when high school graduates return to the fields, parents see the extra seven years of school fees and lost wages as poured down the drain. UNICEF, Plan International, and other NGOs have reported that "selling" education through community involvement can be effective increasing both attendance rates and parental support, but it is a difficult proposition. There are also long-term cultural issues to consider since those members of ethnic minority groups who do excel at education generally do not return to their remote home villages to live traditional lifestyles in which their education would offer them no advantages.

#### CULTURAL BARRIERS COMPLICATE MATTERS

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15. (SBU) With many ethnic minority groups, there are also cultural barriers to widespread educational advancement. Deeply rooted stereotypes that post-primary education is "not necessary" or "not possible" are quite common among ethnic minorities and even the most tireless advocates for ethnic minority education have cited these stereotypes in conversations with ConOfs. These stereotypes are not baseless: ethnic minorities traditionally practiced swidden agriculture, a roving lifestyle predicated on slash-and-burn farming techniques that were neither conducive to, nor dependent upon, formal education.

Cultural traditions also impede preparedness: according to one Jarai pastor, ethnic minority children are ill-prepared to communicate effectively with adults or deal with a structured setting since they traditionally "run around with their friends" from ages two to seven. Parental support for education is hard to come by as most elders did not attend school themselves.

16. (SBU) The most common time for ethnic minorities to drop out of the educational system entirely is when they should move from

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primary to secondary school. Reasons for this include the children's growing labor potential and, particularly for girls, the practice of child marriage which is still common among many groups despite being illegal. Among some minorities, it is common for girls to be married by age 13 or 14 with children following soon afterwards. NGO's active in the area also report that the problem of school dropouts tends to fall through the bureaucratic cracks since the various components of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) tend to focus very narrowly on their specific function (running primary or secondary schools, running vocational schools, running universities, etc.) and therefore do not address cross-cutting issues such as tracking and facilitating the transition from primary to secondary school or motivating children to stay in school and attain a good education.

#### ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

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17. (SBU) MOET's mandating a unified national curriculum and a single language of instruction (Vietnamese) complicates the situation further. According to Plan and UNICEF representatives, the GVN sees unified education as the glue melding together Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups. (Comment: Even the number "54" represents the GVN's obsession with enumerating and categorizing what is more likely an even more diverse ethnic range; most Western scholars believe there are many more than 54 separate groups, but the GVN's overriding goal of national unity translates into a contrived number that cannot be challenged. End comment.)

18. (SBU) This use of education as a tool to achieve national unity is particularly important in the Central Highlands given the region's long history of ethnic minority separatism (ref B). As a result, progressive measures are extremely sensitive; a UNICEF Education specialist noted that only in the past two years ago has UNICEF been able to even broach the topic of mother-tongue education to MOET. Unfortunately, insistence on

single curriculum and language puts ethnic minority students at a distinct disadvantage since few ethnic minority children speak any Vietnamese prior to school. As a result, they enter primary school already far behind their Kinh comrades. Locally relevant curriculum, incorporating traditional ethnic minority knowledge, is by and large excluded; even though 20 percent "local" curriculum is officially permitted, it is largely neglected as few provinces allot resources to develop locally-relevant material. In this light, ethnic minorities' lack of enthusiasm for education is understandable: they are less than enthusiastic about attending schools taught in a language they do not speak based on a curriculum for urban middle-class Kinh that deliberately neglects their cultural national heritage.

¶9. (SBU) Theoretically, at least, the "one language" policy should be softening. According to Vietnam's 2003 Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, one of MOET's goals is to enable students to complete primary education partly in Vietnamese and partly in their mother-tongue by 2010. In support of this, Save the Children and UNICEF are engaged in action-research programs working towards developing mother-tongue education for ethnic minorities. Unfortunately, UNICEF describes their on-the-ground progress as plodding. While mother-tongue literacy is all-but-universally accepted as the best path to second-language literacy by educational theorists, MOET representatives claim that "Vietnam is different" and are demanding research specific to Vietnam. UNICEF (using a written mother-tongue curriculum) and Save (oral only) have "action-research" projects designed to address MOET's concerns by demonstrating the greater effectiveness of mother tongue literacy for second-language (Vietnamese) literacy. MOET's reluctance and the resulting necessity for research is delaying large-scale implementation of native language instruction. UNICEF has thus far developed only kindergarten and first grade curriculums and has only implemented it in those schools involved in the research project.

¶10. (SBU) MOET does not ignore the language barrier entirely. Rather than emphasizing local language instruction, however, they provide an additional year of pre-primary education for minority students to familiarize them with Vietnamese before they start school. This program also faces constraints. Not only is funding a constant issue (as in all Vietnamese schools), there are almost no teachers competent in pre-school or kindergarten pedagogy. Teaching methods incorporating Western-style "active learning" are generally known only to those who have worked with NGOs. Even if these problems could be resolved, teaching five-years old to attain fluency in Vietnamese in the span of a year is highly ambitious to say the least.

¶11. (SBU) The "one language" policy is not the only element of

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Vietnam's standard curriculum that has the (perhaps unintended) effect of disadvantaging and discouraging ethnic minority students. A representative of the NGO Plan International explained that because the national curriculum was designed for urban ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) students, it should not be surprising that ethnic minorities do not find it interesting or valuable. She stated that the stereotype of ethnic minorities "not caring" about education is inaccurate -- ethnic minorities care deeply about education insofar as it is relevant to their lives, their culture, and their future. Since at present it is relevant to none of these things, ethnic minorities do not value education because there is little there for them to value. Because MOET is conceptually uncooperative with full localized curriculums, Plan International and others have worked within the allowed 20 per cent to create both materials and local capacity for curriculum development. While NGO representatives do not expect a wholesale move to local curriculum in the foreseeable future, they are hoping for a gradual expansion of locally-relevant material until it comprises 30 - 40 percent of the total.

PROGRAMS PRAGMATICALLY DIFFICULT

¶12. (SBU) Even if MOET wanted to move rapidly to increase local content and mother tongue instruction, implementing the changes would be challenging at best and likely not possible in the near future. Finding qualified teachers, for example, would be an almost insurmountable problem for mother tongue language instruction. There are, for example, simply no H'mong teachers capable of teaching above the 4th grade level. Even those attempts that MOET has instituted to encourage more ethnic minorities to attend school can backfire. Plan International pointed out that the lowered entrance, class, and exit exam requirements for ethnic minority students that are intended to encourage greater numbers to attend high school and teaching colleges has had the effect of systematically producing unqualified teachers who have not passed normal requirements. There are also cultural barriers within MOET, which has shown a tendency to consider ethnic minorities as monolithic, assigning teachers of one ethnic group to teach another and somehow assuming that they would know the language.

¶13. (SBU) Other structural problems make the goal of native-language, culturally-relevant education even harder to attain. Ethnic minority-Vietnamese bilingual education might be feasible in an area where all the pupils in a school are from the same minority group, but an area with only one ethnic minority is rare. A typical school in the Central Highlands is likely to comprise five or six ethnic groups, each of whom speaks a different language and has different cultural traditions. The multitude of ethnic minority groups whose traditional lands overlap and intersect also means that developing suitable local curriculum is equally challenging. While some provincial officials may oppose ethnic minority curriculum because they fear it will lead to separatist sentiments, the majority do not fund curriculum development for lack of resources.

#### LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL DIMMING

¶13. (SBU) UNESCO and UNICEF representatives express concern at recent developments in the GVN's approach to education. They are concerned that the Minister of Education's decision to place greater emphasis on higher education, especially graduate study abroad, may work to the detriment of basic education initiatives for the most needy. While higher education is of great economic and social benefit to the Vietnamese nation and economy, UNICEF and UNESCO representatives are concerned that the GVN appears to be shifting its limited educational funding away from basic education for the masses and special education for impoverished minorities and towards educating a privileged few at great expense.

#### COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) As with almost any other group in today's modern world, educational attainment will play a large role in determining the economic future of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Education will also play a pivotal role in their integration into the social, cultural, and economic fabric of Vietnam. Ironically, the GVN's focus on nationally unifying education has in many ways backfired since it serves to disadvantage and marginalize the very ethnic minority students it is intended to integrate into the Vietnamese nation. Fundamental changes in the GVN's attitudes and approach are needed or ethnic minorities will continue to fall out of step as Vietnam's urban centers lead the charge towards increasing prosperity based upon industrialization and global integration. Unfortunately, even

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if MOET had the best intentions and the best planning to back them up, pervasive structural and capacity problems mean that improving education for ethnic minorities would be very difficult. End comment.

¶15. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.  
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